



## How U.S. Schools are Affected by Undocumented Immigrant Dreamers and Deferred Action Recipients

**Claudia Triana**, University of Wisconsin-Madison

As of the middle of 2018, Congress still has not provided any legislative response to President Trump's rescinding of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program – the Obama-era executive action called “DACA” for short that provided relief from deportation to approximately 800,000 migrants that grew-up in the United States. Federal court decisions have put President Trump's change on hold but are unlikely to provide a permanent solution. Only Congress can do that. In recent years, various attempts have been made to pass the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (or “DREAM”) Act that would create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children. Immigrant offspring who would benefit have become known as DREAMers.

Many undocumented young people who arrived as children may not have known of their illegal status until they reached adolescence. They attended U.S. schools, tend to be fluent in English, and after high school often take skilled jobs, join the military, or attend college. Those covered by the DACA program are embedded in U.S. society at every level, and the repeal of this program endangers their livelihoods and possibilities of professional success. Key U.S. occupational sectors are affected, too, among them education. Although the exact number is not known, the Migration Policy Institute estimates that over 9,000-teachers will lose their work authorization if the policy is not continued. The removal of such would undercut diversity and exacerbate teacher shortages.

### DACAmented Teachers Further Diversity in Education

Rescinding DACA would not only remove the already unstable legal status of many teachers, it would reduce racial and ethnic diversity in America's teaching ranks and reduce teachers' ability to exemplify and communicate about immigrant experiences.

As of 2014, students of color in American schools outnumber white, non-Hispanic students. As demographic shifts continue, studies by education researchers Ana María Villegas and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine highlight three important reasons to further diversify the ranks of educators in U.S. schools. Teachers of color serve as role models for all students; help students of color improve their achievements and experiences at school; and contribute to a more effective U.S. workforce.

Despite the growing evidence that students of color benefit when they are taught by a diverse group of teachers, teacher demographics are not matching changes in student backgrounds. According to a nationally representative U.S. Department of Education survey of teachers and principals, 82 percent of public school teachers identify as white and this proportion has not changed much over the last 15 years. Every state has a higher percentage of students of color than its share of teachers of color.

## DACAmented Teachers Help Reduce Teacher Shortages

Across the country, the number of available teachers continues to decrease. A report by the Learning Policy Institute indicates that between 2009 and 2014 teacher ranks dropped from 691,000 to 451,000, a 35 percent reduction, with most of the shrinkage due to teachers who leave before retirement age. Teacher shortages have led several states to lower requirements, and by now many districts fill gaps by issuing substandard credentials to many teachers.

Not all subjects are equally affected by teacher shortages. Mathematics, special education, and teachers for English learners are areas in high demand and limited supply, and vacancies in such areas can reduce quality – and can especially affect Black and Latino students in special education and bilingual education.

Research suggests that teachers of color are often motivated into entering the profession by a desire to “give back to the community” and help students of color. Most tend to return to their communities, often in areas that have teacher vacancies. Furthermore, there are models for strategically targeting teachers covered by DACA to address teacher shortages. The need to satisfy teacher vacancies, particularly in bilingual education, prompted Denver Public Schools to partner with Teach for America in order to recruit and hire teachers who are covered by DACA. In this example, the discontinuation of DACA would once again create hard-to-fill vacancies in a district that is currently predominately Latino.

## What Should Happen

Teachers who arrived in the United States as undocumented immigrant children are precariously perched in the middle of the U.S. immigration debate. Those covered by DACA enjoy a slightly more positive reputation than other undocumented migrants. But not all DREAMers have access to the same opportunities. In the private sector, many tech companies engage in vociferous support for their employees who are covered by DACA. But teachers are government employees, so they are less likely to benefit from such public advocacy by their employers.

Although the individual states set requirements for their educator workforce, federal policies dictate immigration – specifying who is allowed to enter, reside, and work in the United States. Schools obviously have an interest in immigration measures that alleviate current teacher shortages and continue the creation of a diverse workforce of teachers and school administrators. In this situation, it makes sense for educators, teacher union leaders, and educational advocates alike to work for the following reforms:

- Press Congress pass to pass legislation creating a path to citizenship for all undocumented immigrants who came to the country as children.
- Support immigrant teachers in their communities and schools.

Making school communities as welcoming and safe as possible for legal-immigrant, mixed-status, and undocumented families – including by offering social services to help families cope with threats of deportation or changes in legal status for their undocumented members.